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SUBJECT: KUWAIT: KEEPING A WARY EYE ON IRAN

REF: A. KUWAIT 423
[¶](#)B. KUWAIT 386

Classified By: Political Counselor Pete O'Donohue for reasons 1.4 b and d

[¶](#)1. (C) Summary: Kuwaiti government officials and foreign policy analysts remain deeply suspicious of Iran's hegemonic ambitions, which they view as a serious threat to the Gulf region and the wider Middle East, and regularly raise the issue at senior meetings with USG officials, most recently with visiting Special Envoy George Mitchell April 21 and the Secretary April 24. Given its tiny size and vulnerable geopolitical situation, Kuwait's nuanced policy avoids confrontation and seeks a degree of normalization, from its safe niche under the ample security umbrella of the U.S. This can lead to the perception of schizophrenia, at best, in its dealings with Iran. Putting a calm face on its "normal" bilateral interactions with Tehran, officials admit privately that they are deeply concerned about Iran's influence in Iraq, its support for Hamas and Hezbollah and incremental subversion of governments throughout the region -- from Morocco to Egypt and Senegal -- and its nuclear ambitions. The GOK is also troubled by Iran's direct challenges to the sovereignty of Kuwait's GCC neighbors, the UAE and Bahrain. Kuwaiti nervousness is heightened by recent USG overtures to Tehran, which they assess are necessitated by a shift in U.S. military and policy focus to Pakistan and Afghanistan, leaving them to wonder about the depth of our long-term security commitment to our GCC partners. End Summary.

Senior GOK Officials Raise Concerns on Iran

[¶](#)2. (C) During several senior meetings in recent weeks (the Secretary's meeting with the Foreign Minister on April 24, Special Envoy Mitchell's meeting with the Amir on April 21 (ref A), and the Ambassador's meeting with the Foreign Minister on April 14 (ref B)), GOK interlocutors raised their continuing anxiety over Iran's perceived meddling in the region, including its efforts to champion Hezbollah activities in Egypt, Syria, and Lebanon and to support Shia factions in Yemen and the Gulf. These concerns mirror the thinking of the bulk of Kuwait's foreign policy establishment, who see in Iran a revolutionary Shia state possessed of the means and desire to fulfill its hegemonic ambitions by fomenting instability throughout the Muslim world and, particularly, in areas with significant Shia populations.

The Nuclear Shadow

[¶](#)3. (C) GOK interlocutors almost invariably raise with Embassy and senior USG officials their concerns about Iran's nuclear ambitions. While few GOK officials believe that Iran would dare deploy a nuclear weapon against another Muslim state, they fear that the mere possession of such a capacity would

enhance Iran's ability to intimidate the neighborhood to a significant degree. Furthermore, and with greater immediacy, GOK officials fear that the proximity of Iranian nuclear facilities, such as the Iranian reactor at Bushehr, presents a real risk of nuclear contamination, either by accident or as the result of an attack by Israel or the U.S. Concerned that such an attack could lead to hostile retaliatory actions against U.S. forces located in Kuwait, GOK officials have invariably counseled USG interlocutors to practice patient dialogue with Iran while, at the same time, working with the international community to maintain a strong sanctions regime. Their frustration with Russia in this regard is palpable.

Hegemonic Ambitions

¶14. (C) Kuwaiti Sunnis from the Amir on down perceive Iran as driven by an agenda to expand its influence -- and Shia tenets and practices -- throughout predominantly Sunni areas by fomenting instability and energizing radical elements in Shia minority communities. Recent Embassy soundings of leading members of Kuwait's foreign policy community revealed widespread concern about Iranian "wheeling and dealing" everywhere in the region. As one Kuwaiti Iran watcher told Poloff, Iran is deeply involved in expanding its influence "from Afghanistan to the Atlantic, an area that is wider than CENTCOM." In the view of this watcher -- a view echoed by others -- Iran stands to benefit from the fact that there is no indigenous balance of power between the Sunni community represented in the Gulf region by the small, demographically-challenged states of the GCC and the Shia

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communities present in Iran and Iraq. For many Kuwaitis, the U.S. presence in Iraq and Kuwait keeps Iran in check, but the U.S. departure from Iraq will create a vacuum that would offer Iran the opportunity to expand its influence "on a gold platter." The FM asserted to the Secretary during their recent exchange that Maliki's Shia-led government was already opening Basra's door to Iranian clerics and migrant Shia's from Bahrain. Many Kuwaiti observers are skeptical about the USG policy focus on Afghanistan and Pakistan, arguing that our efforts there cannot succeed without Iranian cooperation or complicity and will, therefore, require concessions to Iran, e.g. allowing Iran greater freedom of action in the Gulf.

"Devious" Iranians

¶15. (C) Jassem Mubaraki, head of MFA's Arab World Department, recently linked Kuwait's concerns over Iraq to Iranian subversion in Iraq; its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine (which serves as an Iranian "Trojan Horse" directly threatening the internal security of Egypt); its refusal to accept UAE sovereignty over certain Gulf islands; its periodic threat to shut down the Strait of Hormuz; and the claim by some Iranian officials that Bahrain is an Iranian province. In contrast to some Kuwaiti Iran watchers, who tend to the view that dialogue with the "devious" Iranians leads nowhere, Mubaraki viewed the Obama Administration's efforts to reach out to Iran as useful, while cautioning that building a meaningful relationship with Iran will take time. Mubaraki added a plea expressed by other GOK officials that the USG should "keep Kuwait at the heart of any discussions about a new relationship with Iran and not forget your old friend."

Cautious Diplomatic Relations

¶16. (C) Kuwait's diplomatic relations with Iran are innately cautious. According to one MFA official here, Kuwait remains "officially" on good terms with Iran but, in practice, tries to minimize bilateral interaction, viewing it as requiring

great effort with few positive results. When bilateral interaction is unavoidable, officials say, the GOK tries hard not to broach contentious issues and when it feels it must respond to "irresponsible remarks" emanating from Tehran -- such as those making claims on Bahraini or UAE territory -- it tries to do so temperately. Another official told Poloff that Kuwait favors GCC-sponsored multilateral talks for addressing issues with Iran, but even in that setting feels bullied by it. In fact, the Amir reportedly has rebuffed several Iranian invitations to visit Tehran, including one proffered on March 9, and reciprocal invitations have not been extended to the Iranian President. The Kuwaiti MFA desk officer for Iran told Poloff that state visits to Iran will continue to be avoided until the GOI "manifests good will in its deeds."

Concerns Over Sleeper Cells

¶7. (C) The Kuwaitis were particularly offended by the P3's earlier suggestion -- absent consultation with the GCC states -- that Iran had a legitimate regional security role to play.

The fear that Iran will step in to replace the U.S. as the Gulf's "policeman" sends shivers up Kuwaiti spines, not because Kuwaitis believe Iran seeks to occupy Kuwait, but because they believe such a relationship would be an opening to endless cultural, political and religious pressure.

Kuwait's concerns about Iranian dominance focus far less on the prospect of Iranian troops rolling across the border than on continuous low-level efforts to disrupt Kuwait's economy and society, including through the activation of "sleeper cells" in Kuwait's Shia community. (Note: While Kuwaiti interlocutors frequently speculate on the existence of sleeper cells in the Kuwaiti Shia community, Embassy sees little evidence that this particular nightmare has much substance. However, a recent unusually extensive live fire exercise intended to boost the Kuwaiti military's ability to respond to a major civil disturbance aimed at disrupting Kuwait's ports, industry, commerce, and civic activity was clearly designed to counter disruptions emanating from Iran. End Note.)

¶8. (C) Comment: Kuwait's deeply felt concerns form an important backdrop to GOK diplomatic engagement with the USG and other regional actors. Having grown accustomed to a relationship of co-dependence with the U.S. over the past generation, Kuwaitis are now coming to grips with the notion that new security arrangements in the region may be in the

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offing. Kuwaitis are particularly concerned that a U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq will leave them vulnerable to a hegemonic Iran and will seek guarantees that the USG will continue to factor Kuwaiti security interests into its regional security calculus. While generally welcoming the recent USG outreach to Iran, and the accompanying downturn in regional tensions, they fear an overly accommodating USG could, potentially, make too many concessions to Iran for the sake of our goals in Pakistan and Afghanistan, at the expense of Gulf Arab interests. While Kuwaitis understand that the USG footprint in the Gulf may be changing, they will continue to seek security guarantees against Iranian subversion and intimidation, even as they seek to bolster their ties to other GCC states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Egypt, important counterweights against Iranian/Shia influence. End Comment.

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